

[News and Hot Topics](#) » A Proposal for Five Additional Goals after the Summit

A Proposal for Five Additional Goals after the Summit

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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We have just witnessed an amazing spectacle: intensive, national publicity focused on volunteerism! Yes, there was expensive hoopla and glitz, but there were also moments of true inspiration. What kept going around in my mind during the Summit (which I covered as a media representative for *The NonProfit Times*) was that the five goals set for volunteers to help youth were wonderful, but didn't go far enough. The Summit proposed to focus volunteering on mentoring, a healthy start, employable skills, a safe environment, and opportunities for youth to serve others. These are unquestionably appropriate, but they are also noncontroversial and deal with children in a vacuum.

So, in the spirit of wanting to deploy volunteer energy towards a better life for all young people, I propose the following five additional goals for volunteering. What do you think?

1. Help parents earn a livable wage.

Volunteers already have a track record in helping new business owners. SCORE has provided thousands of hours of volunteer consultation to minority and women business owners. VISTA volunteers showed the women of Appalachia that their folk crafts could earn money. Why shouldn't we allow volunteers to tackle the most pressing problem of our times: how under-educated people can earn a living and afford to be good parents to their children?

Consider that volunteers could use the Junior Achievement model and help teenagers and young adults start legitimate for-profit businesses: small appliance repair, home chore services, safety escorts, etc. Non-profits could move into abandoned factories and warehouses and develop cooperative industries. If the revenue is taxable--so what? The line between nonprofit and for-profit is not based on whether the organization can make money--it has to do with who "owns" the company.

2. Mentor on the job.

Instead of diverting the attention of corporations into philanthropic areas in which they have no expertise, why not encourage businesses to develop a certain number of new jobs aimed at former welfare recipients? Because these new employees will undoubtedly need a lot of training and support, organize employee volunteers to mentor their new colleagues. And, when the first set of trainees has moved on, ask them in turn to mentor the next "class." Mentoring may mean help with coming in on time every day, budgeting or arranging child care. Nonprofit agencies could also recruit volunteers to come into the company to offer additional support (to the new employees, not to the company) such as literacy tutoring.

3. Tackle labor union resistance.

The Summit was silent about the fact that many labor unions actively fight against volunteer involvement. While there are indeed situations in which management inappropriately tries to replace paid workers with volunteers, this has never been the intent of the movement to renew citizens' commitment to their own communities. We need to engage union members-- who are themselves volunteers at the shop steward level--in working toward inclusion and not exclusion of volunteer help.

4. Mentor parents as well as children.

All children deserve to get the attention of caring adults and that's why it is important to encourage everyone to make time for a child. But it doesn't make sense to focus on children without attending to the needs of their families. It is also patronizing to assume that parents who are poor or even drug-dependent do not care about their sons and daughters. Mentors ought to broaden their focus to help mothers and fathers help their own children. Why not, for example, a family-to-family mentoring program? Everyone, of all ages, helping one another, would be the strongest model.

5. Be willing to take risks.

In all spheres of American life, we are becoming almost paranoid about the risk of lawsuits. Perhaps our fears are justified in this litigious society, but when it comes to volunteering, we must draw the line. Change always involves risk. Volunteers, at their best, fight for change.

Despite current moves to limit liability, there will always be risk in volunteering. If we sincerely want to do such things as work one-on-one with a child in need or assure safe playgrounds in drug-dealing territory, it is time to accept risk. Volunteers (and organizations) must commit themselves to doing the work despite possible safety concerns and even if someone decides to sue. This is not to disregard the need to take adequate precautions, use safe tools, or train volunteers appropriately. But someone, somewhere, has to say: "I'm going to do what is sensible and right--even if I end up in court." Then it is up to all of us to raise the money needed to defend the suit if it is brought.

Do you think that Mother Theresa or Albert Schweitzer or Harriet Tubman thought about risk management? Volunteers always have the courage of their convictions. Let's keep that spirit going.

Now it's your turn....

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This month's Hot Topic on volunteerism is right on target! You have clearly identified key points that need to be addressed. As a volunteer fire fighter for some 45 years, I have been exposed to your third item, Labor Union Resistance, on a regular basis. All your points are valid. But, in today's socialistic society, don't expect them to be addressed. Have I always been pessimistic? Probably not. But for now I see a society dependent upon government and a government which pays lip service to volunteerism while placing numerous obstacles to it. Oh, well! Maybe things will get better some day.

Response from: *John Stankiewicz, volunteer fire fighter, Weirton, WV USA*

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